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Trust in Government and Support for Municipal Services

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between trust in government and support for local governmental services. It is hypothesized that trust in government will predict support for local government services, but that trust will differentially predict support across policy areas. The results demonstrate that trust predicts support for human services and infrastructure but is not related to support for emergency services. The findings of this article contribute to the broader literature on attitudes toward local governmental services and may hold potential clues for policy makers interested in understanding the factors that shape public preferences for governmental service delivery.

Keywords: trust, trust in government, support for services, municipal government, public policy

Introduction

Recent research has shown that political trust has the potential to shape public preferences for policies and services. For example, research has demonstrated that political trust impacts attitudes toward governmental policy (e.g., Hetherington and Globetti 2002; Rudolph 2009; Herian, Adbel-Monem, and Shank in press) and can also impact individual behaviors related to governmental policy (e.g., Scholz and Lubell 1998; Tyler and Huo 2002). This research is significant, as it represents a shift in scholarship that has primarily focused on understanding the sources of trust; grasping the causes of distrust (e.g., Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002); and dealing with measurement issues related to trust (e.g., Hamm et al. 2011), to research that has sought to better understand the potential manifes-

tations of political trust. The research is also notable in that it provides an avenue for exploring the factors that shape public preferences for governmental service delivery and public attitudes toward spending on services on specific services.

The purpose of this article is to examine the link between political trust and support for local governmental delivery through the “trust-as-heuristic” perspective. This perspective provides a positive account of trust such that as political trust increases, support for governmental policies also increases. This relationship is tested in the context of a local collaborative management effort that asked citizens to participate in the budget development efforts of a moderately sized city in the Midwest. Residents were surveyed on their attitudes toward the city’s budget by indicating the importance of a number of services provided by the city. Respondents were then asked a number of questions related to trust in local government. These measures were aggregated and used to predict support for government involvement and spending. Drawing on the trust-as-heuristic perspective, it was hypothesized that trust would be a positive predictor of support for governmental services. But given the unique nature of service delivery at the local level, and given the wide range of services offered by localities, it was hypothesized that the effects of trust on support would vary across service types.

Trust and Policy Attitudes

As noted previously, scholars have documented the relationships between trust and various attitudes and behaviors at the individual level. For example, research has provided evidence that trust impacts individuals’ support for tax cuts (Rudolph 2009), attitudes toward governmental spending (Rudolph and Evans 2005), attitudes toward racial policies (Hetherington and Globetti 2002), and beliefs about the appropriate roles for different levels of government (Hetherington 2005). Moreover, research has also shown relationships between political trust and behaviors such as taxpaying (Scholz and Lubell 1998), support for political candidates (Citrin 1974), and compliance with court directives (Tyler and Huo 2002). In the field of risk management and environmental management, trust in regulation has been found to be a significant predictor of acceptance of risk regulation (Poortinga and Pidgeon 2003). Other work has found that trust in regulators leads to higher rates of compliance with tax laws (Murphy 2004).

In general, the research examining the trust-attitude and trust-behavior links has been conducted in the context of broad-scale national policies. For example, the work of Rudolph and Evans (2005) and Rudolph (2009) examined the relationship between trust and spending policies at the federal level. Somewhat overlooked in much of the research has been the potential impact of trust in local government upon attitudes toward local government. Service delivery at the local level is likely distinct from service delivery at the national or even state level. Localities have a variety of governing responsibilities including police powers and programs related to health and human services. The direct nature of these programs, where administrators interact directly with constituents, may yield a unique relationship between trust and governance not seen at the national level (e.g., Yang and Holzer, 2006). Moreover, state and local governments are increasingly asked to shoulder the burdens of implementing federal programs. Considering the unique role of local

governments in the U.S. political system, the direct nature of the services provided, and the variety of services provided trust and confidence in government may take on a different role at the local level than at the national level. To date, however, little research has examined this link, thus limiting our knowledge of the ways in which trust in local government manifests itself in the attitudes and behaviors of the people who reside in localities.

Trust and Local Governmental Services

Rahn and Rudolph (2005) explored a wide range of individual- and community-level variables in their analyses of trust in local government. Across their two studies, they found that a variety of variables predict political trust in local governments. Similarly, Donahue and Miller (2006) found that individual factors such as race and media exposure can drive trust in local police and fire services. Recent research on the effects of e-government have provided evidence that e-government can improve process-based evaluations of local government, such that trust in government increases as the use and availability of e-government increases (Tolbert and Mossberger 2006). Van Ryzin (2011) found that trust in local civil servants is driven by both governmental outputs, as well as the procedures used to produce those outputs. His results are consistent with those of Tolbert and Mossberger and is consistent with a line of research that has shown process fairness may be related to trust in government generally (Tyler and Huo 2002; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002).

On the other side of the equation, however, relatively less work has sought to understand the potential effects of trust upon support for local government or local governmental activities. Donahue and Miller (2006), after examining the sources of political trust, focused on the effects of trust in local police and fire agencies. They found that trust in both agencies was a significant predictor of peoples' willingness to pay for emergency services. Cooper, Knotts, and Brennan (2008) examined support for local zoning and land use policies and found that trust in local government was a significant predictor of support for such policies. Together, these works suggest that trust in government can have important implications for support for governmental activities. Aside from this small number of studies, researchers have been slow to examine the trust-attitude link to local governments and have been similarly slow in applying theoretical perspectives to studying this link. The present study draws on the work of Hetherington (2005) and Rudolph (2009) to examine the link between trust and support for governmental through the trust-as-heuristic lens. This perspective is borne out of the political disaffection model, which theorizes that distrust in a governmental entity will reduce support for its policies, while trust in a governmental entity will increase support. Based on this model, it can be hypothesized that trust in government will predict support for local governmental activities.

However, because of the wide number of services provided by any particular locality, it may be useful to go beyond a simple analysis of whether there is a simple relationship between trust and support for government, and instead examine whether trust is differentially related to support for various services. As noted, evidence has suggested that trust is predictive of support for a range of activities at the subnational level such as zoning (Cooper, Knotts, and Brennan 2008), the development of health care-related technologies

(Herian, Abdel-Monem, and Shank in press), and emergency services (Donahue and Miller 2006). Research has not yet examined whether trust, for example, is a stronger predictor of support for zoning and health care-related services than of support for emergency services. Given the wide range of services provided directly by local governments, this lack of knowledge is somewhat problematic, as it prevents us from fully understanding how trust in government relates to the full range of services provided.

There is reason to believe that trust may be more strongly associated with some policies than others. For example, research has shown that support for emergency services (fire and police) is generally high regardless of respondent characteristics (Donahue and Miller 2006; Van Ryzin and Immerwahr 2007). This can be illustrated, in part, through polling data that have shown support for emergency services to remain steady over the years. In March 1993, 52 percent of individuals indicated that they supported police “quite a lot” or “a great deal” according to Gallup. In June 2013, this number was 57 percent (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx#2>). Support for other governmental services such as welfare spending dropped considerably during the 1980s and 1990s (Gilens 1999) and continues to be low today. In contrast to the seemingly consistent nature of public attitudes toward emergency services, it appears that support for other governmental activities is not as consistent across populations, suggesting that support may be dependent on a number of variables. For example, Schneider and Jacoby (2005) found that support for welfare spending is impacted by a number of individual-level factors and elite cues. Further, Jacoby (2000) found that support for policies such as welfare spending and infrastructure can vary depending on both individual characteristics and survey effects.

In short, the lack of variation on indications of satisfaction and support for emergency services might limit the extent to which we can measure statistical relationships between it and other factors such as trust in government. Indeed, in previous research, Herian and Tomkins (2012) found that the correlation between trust in government and satisfaction with fire and ambulance services among an online sample (.27) was considerably lower than the correlation between trust and satisfaction with health department services (.37) and trust and zoning practices (.53). Drawing on this research, it is hypothesized that the relationship between trust in government and support for emergency services will be weaker than the relationship between trust and support for other governmental services.

Data and Method

The data for these analyses come from a collaborative governing effort undertaken by a moderately sized Midwestern city. A random digit dialing (RDD) telephone survey of 605 residents (38 percent response rate) was undertaken in the spring of 2008. In the survey, respondents were asked to first help the city prioritize governmental services by ranking the importance of twelve services provided by the city on a 1–10 scale (1 = very unimportant; 10 = very important). These questions were designed to measure the services in which residents thought it was most important for local government to be involved. To understand residents’ preferred funding mechanism, respondents were then asked how they would prefer to pay for the services that are their top priority: increase taxes, cut funding from another service to pay for the most important ones, or make no change in

revenue generation. Finally, residents were asked eight questions related to trust in city government and were asked to provide some demographic information.

The dependent variables for this analysis were developed from the questions in which respondents were asked about the importance of twelve services. Implicitly, the questions asked respondents to indicate the services in which they would most like to see local government to be involved. These questions provided an ideal place to test the trust-as-heuristic hypothesis, since it was likely that respondents would prefer to see government involved in those services in which they were most trusting or confident that local government could fulfill its duties. The results of those questions are presented in table 1. As the table indicates, fire services and police services received the highest levels of perceived importance ($M = 9.09$ and 8.96 , respectively), and public buses and transportation was rated as the least important (6.88).

Table 1. Mean Importance Scores on Each City Service and Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis

	<i>N</i>	Mini- mum	Maxi- mum	Mean	Standard Deviation	Exploratory Factor Analysis		
Fire and ambulance services	602	1.00	10.00	9.09	1.46	.256	.142	.838
Police services	605	1.00	10.00	8.96	1.55	.062	.229	.861
Management of sewage and stormwater	600	1.00	10.00	7.94	1.84	.347	.497	.384
Street maintenance and management of traffic flow	603	1.00	10.00	7.79	2.04	.051	.747	.310
Health Department services	599	1.00	10.00	7.79	1.98	.677	.222	.257
Job creation and economic development	603	1.00	10.00	7.75	2.20	.283	.576	.115
Libraries	602	1.00	10.00	7.66	1.94	.743	.094	.140
Human services	586	1.00	10.00	7.52	2.01	.687	.244	.253
Parks, trails, and recreation	604	1.00	10.00	7.14	2.02	.678	.172	-.016
Building permits and safety	592	1.00	10.00	7.14	2.07	.396	.552	.147
Zoning and growth planning	597	1.00	10.00	7.05	2.26	.121	.821	.025
Public bus and transportation services	594	1.00	10.00	6.88	2.21	.741	.154	.062

Rather than predict support for each of the twelve services, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted to determine whether the number of dependent variables could be reduced. The factor analysis showed that residents' preferences for local services tended to center on three broad dimensions of governmental activity: Human Services, Infrastructure and Development, and Emergency Services (see table 1). These three broad areas of service delivery, rather than each of the twelve services individually, were used as dependent variables. To create the Human Service variable, the average importance scores for

health department services; human services; libraries; parks, trails, and libraries; and public buses and transportation were used. The mean score was 7.40 ($SD = 1.53$), with a Cronbach's α of .81. To create the Infrastructure and Development variable, the average importance scores for building and safety permits, job creation and economic growth, management of sewage and stormwater, street maintenance and traffic flow, and zoning and growth planning were used. The mean score for this scale was 7.55 ($SD = 1.48$), with a Cronbach's α of .76. Finally, to create the Emergency Services variable, the mean importance scores of fire and ambulance services and police services were used; the mean score was 9.03 ($SD = 1.35$), with an α of .79.

Next, to create an overall score of trust in local government, individual scores on each of the eight items were averaged. The items used to measure trust were developed based on research that has shown trust in government to be a multidimensional construct (e.g., Hamm et al. 2013) and were chosen in consultation with the local government. It is important to note that to decrease the length of the survey, a split-sample design was used with regard to the trust questions. That is, one-half of the sample was asked four trust questions, while the other half was asked the other four. To preserve cases, missing data were imputed with the mean score on each of the four trust questions that were not asked of each respondent. The mean score of this scale was 3.22 ($SD = .39$), with an acceptable level of reliability ($\alpha = .71$). While this imputation method is potentially problematic, follow-up analyses where each set of nonimputed variables was considered independent of the other indicated that data imputation did not affect the general results. The questions used to create this scale and the descriptive statistics are presented in table 2.

Table 2. Mean Trust Scores

	<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
I am satisfied with the Lincoln city government	297	1.00	5.00	3.23	0.97
Public officials in Lincoln city government care about what people like me think	295	1.00	5.00	3.39	0.97
Lincoln city government officials treat residents with respect	290	1.00	5.00	3.57	0.86
I have great confidence in the Lincoln city government	297	1.00	5.00	3.13	0.96
Residents have a great say in important Lincoln city government decisions	302	1.00	5.00	3.01	1.01
Lincoln city government officials base their decisions on the facts, not their personal interests	302	1.00	5.00	2.96	0.98
Lincoln city government officials have residents' best interests in mind when they make decisions	303	1.00	5.00	3.23	0.98
Lincoln city government can usually be trusted to make decisions that are right for the residents as a whole	303	1.00	5.00	3.25	0.98

Participants were also asked about specific attitudes toward taxation; this variable was included in the models estimated subsequently. Specifically, respondents were asked,

“How would you recommend the city fund your two service priorities.” If respondents indicated they would raise taxes, the response was scored a “1”; if they indicated they would prefer to cut funds from other programs, make no change in spending, or take some other approach, the response was scored a “0.” Eighty-seven of the 574 (15.2 percent) respondents indicated that they would be willing to raise taxes to fund their top priority. Three demographic variables were included in the regression models: age, gender, and education.¹ The mean age was 52.94 ($SD = 15.85$), 54 percent of the sample was female, and 48.8 percent of respondents had at least a bachelor’s degree.

Because the three outcome variables in this analysis were continuous variables ranging from 1–10, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was employed. The results of the first set of analyses are presented in table 3; unstandardized coefficients are reported with standard errors in parentheses. As the results show, trust in government predicted support for governmental activity in the realm of human services and infrastructure and development. Trust in government did not predict support for emergency services. Together, the results suggest that trust is, indeed, a predictor of governmental activity, but that the predictive effects of trust diminish in relation to services such as fire and ambulance, where there are relatively high levels of support for governmental activity.

Table 3. OLS Regression Results Predicting Support for Governmental Activity in Broad Service Areas

	Human Services Coefficient (SE)	Infrastructure and Development Coefficient (SE)	Emergency Services Coefficient (SE)
Trust	.51** (.16)	.58*** (.16)	.20 (.14)
Increase tax	.42* (.18)	.04 (.17)	.32* (.16)
Age	-.00 (.00)	-.01* (.00)	-.01 (.00)
Female	.79*** (.13)	.66*** (.12)	.41*** (.11)
Education	-.07 (.04)	-.01 (.03)	.00 (.03)
Constant	7.38 (.27)	7.67 (.26)	9.11 (.24)
R^2	.09	.07	.04
N	533	539	557

Note: OLS = ordinary least squares

Focusing on the other variables in the models, there were a number of notable trends. First, pro-tax attitudes were a significant predictor of human services and infrastructure and development in the two main effects models and in the interaction model predicting support for human services. Second, age was a significant negative predictor of government action in the area of infrastructure and development. Viewed from the perspective that older individuals are less likely to benefit from governmental work in this area, this finding is logical. And finally, there was a strong positive effect of gender, such that women were much more likely than men to support governmental activity across all three areas of service examined here.

Discussion

On balance, the findings provided initial support for the hypotheses stated previously. Political trust significantly predicted whether individuals indicated human services and infrastructure and development as priorities. The relationship was such that a one unit mean increase in trust (on a five-point scale) increased support for human services by .51 and increased support for infrastructure and development by .58. Trust, however, did not predict support for emergency services. Again, emergency services were highly ranked by survey respondents, and, judging by the relatively small standard deviation, emergency services were ranked highly across all survey participants. Thus, support for governmental activity in the area of emergency services was high among this sample, just as support for emergency services has been found to be quite high in other studies examining preferences for local governmental services (Donahue and Miller 2006; Van Ryzin and Immerwahr 2007). As such, the limited variation in the dependent variable may have limited the effects of trust upon support for governmental activity in this area.

In addition to the findings related to trust, the results of the analysis provided a number of other notable results. In particular, attitudes toward tax increases were a significant predictor of support for governmental activity in relation to human services and in the model related to emergency services. These relationships provide evidence that attitudes toward taxation may only be related to support for governmental activity in specific instances. In addition, gender had an effect across each of the six models estimated. The finding provides strong evidence that females were more likely than males to support governmental activity across all three areas of governmental service that were examined in this analysis. While no hypotheses about the effects of gender were provided, the findings are consistent with other research that has shown women to be more supportive of governmental activity in general (Schlesinger and Heldman 2001). In order to more fully understand this relationship, however, future research should continue to parse out preferences for local governmental services in relation to gender.

Finally, the results of this analysis extend the literature related to the trust-as-heuristic perspective of political trust by providing evidence that trust can predict support for some, but not all, governmental activities at the local level of government. Thus, this research has theoretical implications for researchers interested in understanding the ways in which political trust is related to attitudes toward local governmental activities. Furthermore, this research contributes to the overall understanding of political trust by providing evidence that trust may be differentially related to the various types of activities in which local governments are involved. Again, this finding has potential theoretical implications for our understanding of trust. Future studies might further refine our understanding of this relationship by examining whether specific dimensions of trust are related to support for specific aspects of service delivery.

The results may have practical implications by suggesting to policy makers that there are certain areas of service provision where it may be more (or less) important to attempt to generate public trust in an institution in order to facilitate service provision. For example, if a local government is attempting to foster support for infrastructure projects or human services, then trying to enhance the public's trust in government might be an effective

strategy. In such cases, governments may want to implement interventions designed to boost trust in government. On the other hand, when attempting to generate public support for police and fire services, the most efficient tactic likely will not involve attempting to increase or appeal to individuals' trust in government. Moreover, the results of these analyses may also help local governments identify which residents are most likely to support infrastructure and human service projects. Specifically, individuals with high levels of trust may be the ones most likely to support spending on such efforts, and it may be beneficial for governments to target these people when attempting to generate public support for spending on these services.

Of course, it is important to recognize that the effective provision of services itself can enhance the trust and confidence in local government. That is, in those cases where individuals view their local government as effectively delivering services, and when they are satisfied with the service delivery, trust and confidence increase (Heintzman and Marson 2005). Effective service delivery involves not only effectively engaging citizens (customers) but also having engaged public employees who are satisfied with their employment and engaged in the work they do. In short, having an effective work force that efficiently delivers services to residents can also work to increase trust and confidence in government, which may then drive support for specific types of services delivered by a locality.

Before concluding, it may be beneficial to acknowledge a number of limitations of this analysis. The primary limitation of this article is its reliance upon survey data from a specific geographic location, which reduces the study's generalizability to other locales. In addition to geographic limitations, it is important to note that this survey was conducted in spring 2008, just months before the economic situation in the United States deteriorated and just months before a contentious presidential election. It is possible that a replication survey would yield somewhat different findings in today's economic and political climates. Aside from spatial and temporal considerations, the type of questions related to political trust may have impacted the results. That is, the trust questions used in this analysis were developed by the author in conjunction with the city which sponsored the survey. Future research would be well served by incorporating standard political trust questions, such as those from the National Election Studies, with questions such as those that were asked for the purposes of this study. Furthermore, the split sample design used to assess political trust led to a number of necessary data imputations that may have decreased the overall quality of the data related to political trust. Separate regressions without the imputed trust questions incorporated were estimated, and the results yielded qualitatively and quantitatively similar results; nonetheless, this potential weakness of the research design must be noted. Finally, a potential endogeneity problem may have been introduced in that trust and service preferences were measured at the same time. In the future, a time-series data collection effort might help more fully assess the relationships between these variables.

Conclusion

This inquiry contributes to the literature on political trust in several ways. First, this article contributes to scholarship in public policy by addressing the relative lack of research linking trust in government to policy-related concerns (see Mullinix 2011, 69). Second, the findings suggest that trust is indeed a predictor of support for governmental services but that the relationship between trust and support for services varies across service domains, which is expected given the variety of activities and spending endeavors undertaken by local governments. Finally, this article holds potential lessons for policy makers by demonstrating that political trust is an important variable that can affect citizens' views on the services delivered by local governments. Consequently, it may be beneficial for policy makers to explore the ways in which political trust might be enhanced among the public in order to foster public support for the delivery of particular public services.

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Note

1. Previous research (Rudolph and Evans 2005; Rudolph 2009) has shown that ideology has an impact upon attitudes related to government policies and spending. However, because this survey was done under the auspices of a local collaborative governing exercise, no overtly political questions were included on the survey. While this omission limits the dimensionality of the analysis, it is only a limitation to the extent that spending by local government is an ideological issue.

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